The Sharing City Seoul: Global Imaginaries of the Sharing Economy and its Local Realities*

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This article examines the role of Seoul, South Korea's capital, in the global imaginaries of the sharing economy. Experiments with sharing have been attempted all over the world, but Seoul was the first to proclaim itself a sharing city in September 2012, to much acclaim worldwide. Detailing Seoul's sharing agenda, the article shows that international enthusiasm about Seoul's sharing economy depends on exaggerating its scale and ignoring its complicity with the usual distribution of economic opportunities. My overarching argument, however, is that globally the sharing economy is significant as an imaginary of a post-capitalist future and that, by appearing to be what it was not, the Sharing City Seoul has played an important role in energizing those imaginaries. The article's data comes from public discourses about Seoul's sharing economy and participant observation at its two ritual sites, OuiShare Fest 2016 in Paris and Seoul Sharing Fest 2016.

Keywords: *sharing economy; Sharing City Seoul; imaginary; post-capitalism; OuiShare*

Introduction: "The First Sharing City"

In May 2016, Paris's Cabaret Sauvage was overrun with young entrepreneurs, activists, and academics who gathered for three days to participate in the OuiShare Fest, an annual gathering of enthusiasts of peer-to-peer collaboration and exchanges, which are often referred to as the sharing economy. First organized in 2013, the OuiShare Fest has been conceived as realizing "a global community … to build a collaborative future" (OuiShare 2013). In 2016, two thousand attendees took in keynote speeches at the crowded main Circus, hopped among expert panels and workshops at four adjacent tents, and, during breaks, lined up for organic food supplied by local farmers and served by the festival's many volunteers. On the first day of the event, I joined a circle of about twenty participants for a workshop on the regulation of sharing and collaborative initiatives. It was drizzling, and we cosily crowded under the tent to leave no one in the rain. The workshop leader, Brhmie Balaram, a senior researcher at the Royal Society of Arts in the United Kingdom, handed each of us a different page-size picture. Every image represented a specific historical development, such as the 1920s farmers' movement in the United States, the rise of big retail stores in the 1990s, and the dot-com bubble of 1999. My picture was the Lehman Brothers logo, to signify the 2008 financial crisis. She invited us to sit ourselves in the chronological order of the events and collectively construct a history of the sharing economy. While participants struggled with historical events, the recent developments were easily explained.

One of the pictures was a photograph of Seoul mayor Park Won-soon (Pak Won-sun), the only portrait among the distributed images. It was given to an American entrepreneur in his late 20s, but he could not identify who the picture was of. Balaram stepped in to explain that that was the Seoul mayor who "created the first sharing city." In a couple of sentences she presented Seoul as a star of the sharing economy, noting approvingly that Seoul is "in the process of banning Uber" but supports local car-sharing services. She told us that Mayor Park's sharing program was recently announced the winner of the prestigious Gothenburg Award for Sustainable Development. Throughout the three days of the festival, speakers at various sessions mentioned the Seoul mayor and his sharing projects in much the same way as Balaram had.

While the success of the Sharing City Seoul was definitely a part of the sharing community lore, only three people participated from South Korea—myself, and two businessmen, who, as I later learnt, were primarily interested

in the uses of blockchain technology, one of the streams at the conference. This disconnect between Seoul's presence and absence captures the ambiguity of Seoul's leadership in the global sharing discourses—simultaneously widely recognized yet missing. This article unpacks this uncertain presence to offer insights about the sharing economy as a global phenomenon. I show that, although Seoul is considered the world's leader in the sharing economy, what goes under the rubric of sharing in South Korea matches the visions of Euro-American pundits only marginally and is better understood by situating the sharing projects within the local vested interests and civil-society politics.

My goal however is not to dethrone Seoul—after all, it was officially the first sharing city whatever the project meant on the ground. Rather, I am interested in drawing out what the transnational imagination of the Sharing City Seoul enables for the sharing economy as a set of global discourses and practices. As geographer Lizzie Richardson (2015) has argued, the sharing economy is paradoxical in how it is simultaneously an extension of capitalism and its alternative. For her, articulating this alternative is valuable, even if only as a performative disruption to neoliberal economic arrangements. If the significance of the sharing economy is at least partially in what it makes imaginable, Seoul has played a crucial role in stimulating those imaginaries, as my vignette from the OuiShare Fest illustrates. Seoul's mythologized example has served as a resonant success story for sharing advocates, even though in Seoul itself the sharing economy was not nearly as prominent as imagined by foreign observers and hardly disruptive of anything. I thus argue that by appearing to be what it was not, the Sharing City Seoul has given a boost to the transformative visions of sharing beyond South Korea.

I develop these points by juxtaposing data on Seoul's sharing policies and achievements with public discourses about them. I also rely on ethnographic data from the OuiShare Fest and its South Korean counterpart, the Seoul Sharing Fest. Anthropologists have fruitfully approached conferences and trade shows as significant ritualistic occasions, where communities of practice are congealed, shared ideologies articulated, and hierarchies negotiated (e.g., Sunder Rajan 2006). My approach is particularly influenced by Gabriella Coleman's (2010) work on hackers' conferences. Coleman details how at such ritualistic occasions the community is shaped not only via what is said, but also via "where they [participants] are willing to meet and especially what they are willing to do with their bodies, with each other during these times of intense interaction, and what they are willing to express to each other during and after the conference" (2010, p. 67). In this vein, my ethnographic vignettes from the OuiShare Fest and the Seoul Sharing Fest

convey on-the-ground dynamics of such gatherings while revealing ideologies and commitments of the gathered sharing communities.

The following section clarifies what is meant by the sharing economy, sketches the genealogy of sharing economy discourses, reviews arguments of its enthusiasts and critics, and argues for its importance as an imaginary. I also expand my discussion of the OuiShare Fest to frame it as a window into the world of sharing imaginaries and itself an attempt at their materialization. The next two sections tell the story of the Sharing City Seoul and track its rise to global prominence. Then I show that international enthusiasm about Seoul's sharing economy depends on exaggerating its scale and ignoring its complicity with the usual distribution of economic opportunities in favor of big capital and the well-off. I further my points with an account of the Seoul Sharing Fest 2016, the South Korean counterpart of OuiShare, which took place half a year after the Parisian event. In conclusion, I revisit my points about the productivity of the myths about the Sharing City Seoul.

The Sharing Economy and Its Imaginary Achievements

The label of the sharing economy has been attached to extremely diverse endeavors, from online peer-to-peer file exchanges and Wikipedia, to local tool libraries and time banks among neighbors, to multinational corporations like Uber and Airbnb. Many an article on the sharing economy comments on the difficulties of formulating a meaningful definition of the phenomenon, whereas some sharing advocates have been avoiding the contested term. This lack of conceptual clarity is exacerbated by the fact that the contemporary sharing economy has little to do with sharing as a mode of resource transfer.[1] Rather than offering another definition, I approach the sharing economy as a contested discourse and focus on what is at stake in its circulation.

While the origins of the term are debated, the sharing economy first got

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[1] Anthropologist Thomas Widlok (2013, 2016) has helpfully situated the sharing economy within anthropological work on resource transfer and exchange. Asserting sharing as "a fundamental and independent part of the human repertoire of making a living" (2016, p. 1), he describes it as a social scenario "that highlights opportunities instead of obligations and that replaces the tripartite scheme of giving, accepting and returning with one of requesting, responding and renouncing. … [Sharing] provides an alternatives to both the logic of utilitarian means-ends categories *and* to the 'convivialist' concept of society based on imposed obligations and abstract collective bonds" (2016, pp. 10-11, italics in original). Widlok offers an important clarification on how sharing proper differs not only from commercial exchanges but also, less intuitively, from gift giving. While a resource transfer, sharing is not an exchange, whether commercial or reciprocal, but a redistribution.

notice when used by law scholar Lawrence Lessig in his 2008 book *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. Lessig introduces sharing via the example of peer-to-peer file-sharing and ultimately models it after Wikipedia, whose contributors "are motivated … by the fun or joy in what they do" (2008, p.162). Inspired by the synergetic coexistence of the open-source software movement with commercialized software, Lessig advocates hybrid economies which leverage value created in the sharing economy for a commercial gain, while respecting the sharing community. Lessig's vision has been promoted by Creative Commons, an international non-profit organization he co-founded in 2001.

Ideas related to the sharing economy also germinated in Silicon Valley among startup entrepreneurs, who conceptualized it along the lines of the "Californian ideology" (Barbrook and Cameron 1996).[2] Among those thought leaders was Neal Gorenflo who quit his corporate job in 2004 to organize monthly gatherings for Bay Area startups interested in peer-to-peer asset sharing, called "The Abundance League" (Seldin and Gorenflo 2016).

In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, "sharing" got cachet beyond startup entrepreneurs and Creative Commons activists as many saw their livelihoods threatened and became more open to experimenting with alternative economic arrangements. Books on the sharing economy—*The Sharing Solution: How to Save Money, Simplify your Life & Build Community* (Orsi and Doskow 2009); *What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption* (Botsman and Rogers 2010); *The Mesh: Why the Future of Business is Sharing* (Gansky 2010); *Share or Die: Voices of the Get Lost Generation in the Age of Crisis* (Harris and Gorenflo 2012)—captivated audiences. In 2009 Gorenflo launched the nonprofit online hub Shareable, which quickly became an influential venue for publicizing commercial and nonprofit sharing initiatives. In 2011, *Times* magazine listed the sharing economy among its "10 Ideas That Will Change the World" (Walsh 2011).

Changing the world has been the aspiration of some sharing enthusiasts indeed. They framed sharing as a social movement to bring about an alternative economic system that leaves behind the scarcity and inequality of

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[2] As the authors of the concept put it, "Californian Ideology promiscuously combines the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies. This amalgamation of opposites has been achieved through a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies. In the digital utopia, everybody will be both hip and rich" (Barbrook and Cameron 1996, p. 1). Social critic Tom Slee succinctly explains the Californian ideology as "the beliefs that you can do well by doing good and that markets can in fact be used to 'scale up' efforts for social change" (2015, p. 15).

contemporary capitalism. The sharing economy was to hand control over the economy to regular people and disrupts the dominance of corporations. In a sense, the sharing economy was a reincarnation of the messianic imaginaries of the Internet, which in its early days was envisioned as an agentive force to transform society. Less radical advocates of sharing approached it as an ethical business model, highlighting economic advantages as well as environmental and communal benefits to be had from "collaborative consumption."

In contrast, critics have seen the sharing economy as an expansion of neoliberal capitalism (e.g., Cockayne 2016; Slee 2015; Martin 2016; McNeill 2016). Often focusing on Uber and Airbnb, they pointed out how the sharing economy had been about undercutting established industries by bypassing regulations; disempowering workers by treating them as part-time freelancers; and furthering commercialization of everyday life. Critical analysts emphasize that sharing in the contemporary sharing economy is "a euphemism at best and mystification of commercial market relations, at worst," as anthropologist Thomas Widlok writes about car sharing, a paradigmatic example of the sharing economy (2016, p. 140).

While siding with the critics, this article nevertheless urges caution against dismissing the sharing economy as a smokescreen for neoliberal entrepreneurship and commodification of the commons. The "imaginary achievements" in the section's title is a pun meant to draw attention not only to the illusory nature of the sharing accomplishments but also to foreground the importance of the sharing economy as an imaginary. As Arjun Appadurai argued, "The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (1996, p. 31). In this vein, this article takes seriously what discourses about the sharing economy make imaginable.

Sharing utopias are susceptible to many criticisms, but their very existence is noteworthy in the face of the ideological impasse of the last decades when a post-capitalist future is all but inconceivable in the mainstream discourses. Unlike other ideologies articulated by the organic intellectuals of the capitalist class, some strands of sharing economy do not simply propose to patch up capitalism with empowering the markets (neoliberalism) or ethical cultivation (corporate social responsibility), but to leave it behind altogether. "Capitalism is giving birth to a progeny. It is called the sharing economy on the Collaborative Commons," heralds, for instance, Jeremy Rifkin (2016), a sharing economy guru. He draws a picture of an equitable, democratic, and environmentally sustainable society enabled by the Internet's

hyper-connectivity and cooperative behaviors fostered by the expanding infrastructures of the sharing economy. Whereas attempts to resurrect the communist horizon (e.g., Dean 2012) remain marginalized and burdened with Cold-War demonization, evangelists of sharing bring conversations about post-capitalism to the pages of many a mainstream publication, from *Forbes* to the *New York Times*. In other words, however problematic its current operationalizations are, the sharing economy is overcoming the failures of imagination in thinking of a future beyond capitalism. Latching on this transformative impulse, I am approaching the sharing economy as a world-making discourse (Warner 2002) and hold out an opportunity for its disruptive potential. There is no denying that the "huggable" sharing narrative is deployed as an ideological justification for new exploitative practices of contemporary capitalism (Scholz 2014). This however does not erase the transformative potential of the sharing utopia and affirmative-critical contributions of attempts at its actualization.

In holding out for the indeterminacy of the sharing economy's future trajectory, my perspective resonates with that of Richardson (2015) who focuses on "the *performances* of the sharing economy" (p. 121, italics in original). Her concept of performance comes from economic geography, where it is mobilized, first, to conjure new economic arrangements by theorizing them, and, second, to disturb the dominant performances by identifying differences in dominant narratives (2015, p. 122; Gibson-Graham 2008). Richardson foregrounds how the ideologies of the sharing economy include "an ethos towards ownership as common and/or open" (p. 124), absorbed from the "cyber culture" of hackers and from experiments with "diverse economies" (pp. 123-124). She finds this ethos performed at the OuiShare Fest 2015, the earlier meeting of the sharing community introduced in my opening vignette. Richardson's examples, however, foreground how the transformative impulses harbor their own undoing. Participation in communal sharing is enhanced by the Internet, but also curbed by it because the mechanisms of identifying potential participants are skewed in favor of the usual privileged groups (p. 125). While replacement of individual ownership with access to common resources is among the sharing ideals, participation in the sharing economy is often mediated by the market and is chosen over ownership out of necessity (pp. 125-126). Newly enabled collaborations—crowdsourcing of labor—offer opportunities for utilizing idle resources among strangers, yet come with further fragmentation of work and unbalanced distribution of risks and profits (pp. 126-127). These examples substantiate Richardson's argument that the sharing economy "has the

potential to both shake up and further entrench 'business-as-usual' through the ongoing reconfiguration of a divergent range of (economic) activities" (p. 122).

Whereas Richardson sees the OuiShare Fest as only suited for preliminary research, in part because "such a methodology does not focus on the activities of the sharing economy" (2015, p. 124), I consider sharing-themed gatherings as *themselves activities of the sharing economy.* At such events participants collectively stabilize discourses on sharing and draw lines of inclusion and exclusion. Moreover, their activities and interactions are significant because they also operationalize their values and ritualize their commitments. In so far as sharing enthusiasts see themselves as a part of a social movement, such gatherings are important for materializing the social change the participants promote, however limited its scale. It is with this emphasis on the centrality of sharing festivals for the sharing economy project that I consider the dynamic of the OuiShare Fest 2016 and, later in the article, of the Seoul Sharing Fest 2016.

Vignette 1: OuiShare Fest, May 2016

The OuiShare Fest 2016 gathered a vibrant community energized by a dream and committed to experimentation. The festival's theme was "After the Gold Rush," to reflect "the post-euphoric, sobered-up state many of us found ourselves in, as the reality of exploitative business-as-usual stomped on our idealistic Sharing Economy," as the festival website explained. The 2016 event was about reflecting on what has worked, what has failed, and what could be done to realize the sharing visions in the future. Many of those propositions sounded naive and ignorant of historical lessons, but the zany enthusiastic vibe was contagious, energizing, and hope-inducing.

Among the attendees, the predominant groups were young startup entrepreneurs, but there was also a significant contingent of researchers from government and non-government organizations as well as grassroots activists at the cusp of entrepreneurial and community-organizing worlds. Most presenters seemed to be in their twenties and thirties, though featured speakers included established academics, such as Ezio Manzini of the Politecnico di Milano, the author of several influential books on social design, and Yochai Benkler, the Harvard professor behind the *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (2006), a key text for the sharing community. Most participants came from Western Europe and North America; Latin America, the Middle East, and North

Africa were noticeably represented, but I saw few attendees from Asia. Many sessions attracted more people than assigned areas could hold, so participants crowded the aisles and passageways.

Other than the collaborative history workshop, I participated in a session where we were assigned to groups to brainstorm sharing strategies to solve diverse urban problems, from lack of public transportation to gentrification. I attended a roundtable on bossless organizations, whose invitees shared their experiences of running their startups in such a way. Several presenters from the United States highlighted how cooperatives offered a legal structure for "sharing" organizations, and some speakers championed platform cooperativism, an alternative to corporate-owned platforms, such as Uber and Airbnb, which were lambasted as the bad guys sabotaging the promise of sharing. Much was said about blockchain, which was cast as the new messianic technology to transform the world by automating trust and transparency. There were presentations on implementing collaborative governance in for-profit and nonprofit organizations; convincing venture capitalists to invest in startups that experiment with decentralized autonomous organization and pursue social change before profits; managing employee-owned companies and measuring value beyond monetary gains. Whatever the solutions, the participants agreed on the problem—the current economic system was detrimental to human thriving and needed to be left behind.

Many sessions were geared toward cultivating sharing as a way of life, with a strong New Age flavor. Facilitators talked about "upgrading the human OS [operating system]," practicing "Dragon Dreaming," and connecting with one's hypergender. One day started with a guided meditation session. Another warm-up activity was to share vulnerability with another participant, an exercise in connecting. One woman seemed to have spent the whole conference leading blindfolded attendees through the crowded grounds of the Cabaret Sauvage, an experiment in trusting strangers.

Too familiar with Marxist critique to be enthused by startups' revolutionary potential celebrated at many panels, I was nevertheless inspired by how the organization of the festival strove to realize the sharing ideals at their most ambitious. The OuiShare Fest was designed to be a conference where participants not only celebrate whatever cause brought them together but also "re-enact the most important elements of their lifeworlds" (Coleman 2010, p. 66). Experimenting with bossless organization structures, the planning committee minimized centralized coordination, depending on volunteers to find important things to do and make them happen on their own. Realizing the focus on local collaborations, many sessions involved

group activities. There was a special tent for pitching startup ideas, and connecting potential collaborators was the purpose of the sticky note wall. The commitment to local connections was enacted when the festival included communal meals made from local ingredients acquired from, or donated by, local producers. The final dinner was made from the leftover ingredients procured from local restaurants, and the chef cooked them into four kinds of delicious stews on the premises of Cabaret Sauvage. It was in these experiments that OuiShare participants were *doing* the sharing economy and actualizing the sharing ideals. Having sketched one global node of the sharing economy, I turn to Seoul whose experiments with sharing have played an important role in keeping those ideals alive.

The Sharing City Seoul and Mayor Park Won Soon

In South Korea, the sharing economy has been on the radar since the late 2000s. Initially sharing was propagated by the local branch of Creative Commons (CC), launched in March 2005 and identifying with Lawrence Lessig's ideas. CC Korea not only translated CC licenses, but also promoted open data and CC-friendly business models with festivals, seminars, workshops, conferences, and hackathons, many of which deployed sharing as a keyword. In the discourses of CC Korea, the sharing economy was by and large synonymous with sharing culture. It was posited as an offline continuation of online collaborative practices, whose expansion was to solve many contemporary issues, from environmental degradation to scarcity and erosion of communities.

The South Korean corporate world also discovered the sharing economy. In July 2010, sharing was introduced as an innovative business model during the Tablet Forum, a major business gathering. For the corporate audience, the sharing economy was presented as blending corporate social responsibility with social entrepreneurship, both discourses well familiar and much praised in South Korea. That was also how the mainstream media framed the phenomenon when familiarizing South Koreans with the concept and its implementations abroad, primarily in the United States.

Those public discourses often conflated the two words for sharing in Korean, *nanum* and *kong'yu*, the latter one used in the Korean phrase for sharing economy, *kong'yu kyŏngje*. Nanum implies sharing as distributing and comes with warm connotations of care and charity. Nanum appears in initiatives to run soup kitchens for the poor, help victims of violence, or offer

services for the disabled. Kong'yu literally means co-ownership, and the word's Sino-Korean etymology lends it an official tone. Before the discourses of the sharing economy arrived, kong'yu appeared in formal texts about co-owned assets and did not command an emotional charge. Discourses about the sharing economy, however, treat nanum and kong'yu as synonymous and transfer the emotional intensity of the former to the latter. This conflation likened the sharing economy to nonprofits and social enterprises, a theme that would play out in Mayor Park's sharing agenda.[3]

Self-designated sharing companies appeared in Korea in the fall 2011, the most visible examples being Green Car and SoCar, short-term car-rental services modeled after Zipcar. The spring of 2012 saw an emergence of "sharing" startups, which linked peers for a fee. Zipbob connected strangers to go to restaurants together, under the rubric of social dining. Kozaza followed Airbnb's model, but specialized in old-style Korean houses for tourists. Wonderlend offered a platform for peer-to-peer short-term renting of tools, tents, equipment, and other household items. Most admiration went to Open Closet, a nonprofit that lent second-hand interview clothing to job seekers.

The leadership in defining the sharing economy in South Korea, however, was soon seized by Seoul's newly elected mayor Park Won Soon, who in September 2012, one year after his first election, proclaimed Seoul a sharing city. Park's approach to sharing diverged from both the technology focus of CC Korea and from business administration discourses centered on profits to be made from sharing. In his Sharing City Seoul Declaration, Park promised,

> I will solve social and economic problems of Seoul by restoring the old traditional sharing culture that was destroyed by urbanization. … Originally our country had a long history of sharing culture (*kong'yu munhwa*) such as sharing work (*p'umasi*) and farmers cooperatives (*ture*), but because of industrialization and urbanization the community spirit disappeared … as sharing culture expands, I hope we can recover the lost communal culture. (qtd. in Pak 2012)

The quote is representative of how Park and his followers linked the contemporary sharing economy to idealized native tradition destroyed by

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[3] Social enterprises are corporations which combine economic and social goals, pursuing the latter via market-based activities. See Kim 2016 for an extensive discussion.

modernity. The sharing agenda of Seoul's mayor, however, is better understood not through the lens of primordial culture but as grounded in contemporary South Korean progressives' critique of neoliberal capitalism and civil-society solutions to its contradictions.

To explain the local context, South Korean ruling elites espoused neoliberal doctrine in the 1980s, and, especially after the 1997 Asian Debt Crisis, the national economy has been restructured to enhance the freedoms of capital under the pressure from the International Monetary Fund. In an oft-commented ironic twist, the neoliberal reforms of the late 1990s were implemented by the president elected from the progressive camp, Kim Dae-jung. Descendants of the radical student movement, South Korean progressives were articulate critics of capitalism and its abuses. However, Kim's balancing of the demands from international lenders and foreign and domestic capital resulted in a rough deal for regular Koreans, who, in the name of recovering the national economy, were faced with disappearance of stable jobs, income polarization, growth of household debt, and shrinking of the middle class.

While in power and after losing the presidential office in 2008, South Korean progressives saw civic participation as a key to enhancement of democracy and a remedy for economic inequality. This orientation toward mobilizing civil society, however, often ended up complicit with the neoliberal ethos of having citizens take responsibility for securing their own well-being. For example, JooHwan Kim (2016) offers an excellent analysis of how this neoliberal cooptation happened with social enterprises. While social enterprises were championed by the progressives as a remedy to the abuses of neoliberal capitalism, social entrepreneurs were compelled to subordinate their concerns with social values to the calculations of the bottom line. In this way the promotion of social entrepreneurship by the critics of neoliberal capitalism ultimately worked to deflect anti-neoliberal resistance and reinforce the neoliberal hegemony.

Though Park Won-soon was elected Seoul mayor as an independent candidate, he was a notable figure in the progressive civil society. His career reflects its path, while offering insights into the local genealogy of the Sharing City Seoul. Starting as a student activist in the 1970s, Park was expelled from university, but studied independently to become a human rights lawyer. In 1993, Park played a crucial role in launching People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, an iconic civil-society organization that crusaded against corruption in big business and government. Park's interest in sharing (*nanum*) tracks back to at least 1999, when he started the nonprofit Beautiful

Foundation, an organization dedicated to gathering donations for the disadvantaged. One of the Foundation's projects was the highly successful social-enterprise chain Beautiful Store, which sold second-hand items while promoting recycling and fair trade. In 2006, Park founded Hope Institute, a privately funded nonprofit organization, launched to collect and implement citizens' ideas for improving life, under the aegis of social design and social innovation.[4] Park began promoting social enterprises almost immediately after assuming mayoral duties in 2011. This trajectory indicates that, for Park, the sharing economy was, if not an offshoot, then a close cousin of social economy and loosely fit with the progressive orientation toward mobilizing citizens to solve their own problems. Tellingly, the city government branch that stewarded the Sharing City Seoul plan has been the Seoul Innovation Bureau, an agency Park created to revolutionize policy-making by seeking direct input from citizens in solving social, economic, and environmental problems.

Park's Sharing City Seoul plan pursued two directions. Sharing startups (for-profit and nonprofit) were stimulated with financial, administrative, and promotional support, while legal infrastructure for sharing was being created by identifying and revising the laws that obstruct sharing entrepreneurship. In terms of encouraging startups, the first major initiative was to develop a car-sharing program, whose potential operators were invited to bid in October 2012. The selected providers, SoCar and GreenCar, signed the agreement with the city and were offered benefits, such as discounted access to public parking lots, subsidies on the purchase of the electric cars, and discounts for users who transferred to public transport within 30 minutes. The city-level umbrella program was called Nanum Car (Sharing Car), though its business model was short-term car renting. On the legislative front, in December 2012, the Seoul Metropolitan City Sharing Promotion Ordinance was passed, obliging the mayor and city officials to promote sharing. A Sharing Promotion Committee was established, and rules were developed for selecting "sharing" organizations to receive municipal support. The city of Seoul designated 20 companies as sharing organizations and allocated about 240,000 US dollars to support sharing initiatives in the first year (Ejang 2013). In June 2013 ShareHub, a bilingual website for everything sharing in Korea, was launched by CC Korea. Officially contracted to promote Seoul's sharing projects, CC Korea also led informational events for

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[4] Anthropologist Amy Levine (2016) offers an insightful ethnography of Hope Institute and details Park's career before his mayoral election.

university youths and organized a sharing startup school.

While the roots of the Sharing City Seoul lie in the local civil-society agenda, the initiative sought global visibility. International attention was courted by hosting high-profile events and inviting speakers from among famed foreign experts. For example, Smart Cloud Show 2013, one of the major IT events in South Korea, featured talks by Rachel Botsman, co-author of an influential book on sharing; Airbnb co-founder Joe Gebbia; and Travis Kalanick of Uber. Pundits of the sharing economy were invited to give lectures, tour Seoul's sharing initiatives, and meet sharing enthusiasts among South Korean policy-makers, entrepreneurs, and CC Korea staff. It was not long before these efforts established the Sharing City Seoul as an unavoidable reference in the global sharing discourses.

International Acclaim of the Sharing City Seoul

"Is Seoul the Next Great Sharing City?" asked in July 2013 Cat Johnson of Shareable, an influential voice for the sharing economy. Her commendatory report offered an overview of the government plan, and introduced Nanum Car and a number of for-profit and nonprofit "sharing" startups. Johnson's next piece, "Sharing City Seoul: a Model for the World" (2014) further secured Seoul's sharing reputation. "Around the world, cities have tiptoed into the waters of the sharing economy, but too often, it's little more than a gesture. Seoul is a shining exception," Johnson wrote.

Both of Johnson's reports became a standard reference for English-language discussions of Seoul's sharing economy, which began to appear in the writings of sharing advocates (e.g., Agyeman, McLaren and Schaefer-Borrego 2013; Guerrini 2014). Longer pieces would recall South Korea's story from rags to riches, compliment its IT infrastructure, comment on Mayor Park's commitment to social innovation, and profile several exemplars of the local sharing enterprises. Many would include a description of an imaginary day saturated with sharing economy services, or list everything that one can do via a sharing platform in Seoul, alleging that availability equals widespread use. Similar conclusions were encouraged by the oft-quoted statistics on high penetration of smartphones and IT services in South Korea. Many such an account appeared in the aftermath of writers' visits to South Korea, where they graced sharing economy events and were shown Seoul's sharing marvels.

Such was a piece by Shareable founder Neal Gorenflo, who toured Seoul's sharing achievements in spring 2014. His blog post reports how he

was swooshed from one event to another while being introduced to anybody who is anybody in South Korean sharing scene, including mayor himself. Musing about "ancient values" and "Seoul's miraculous jump into modernity" Gorenflo (2014a) prophesied,

> With its advanced infrastructure, homogenous population, and emerging civil society, Seoul could become a Sharing Mega-city in less than one generation. With its growing soft power and geographic position between China and Japan, Seoul could influence changes in other major Asian cities where nearly a third of all humans live. Could Seoul become the city that saves the world? It's possible.

A few months later, when Seoul's fame as the leader of the sharing economy was somewhat challenged by Uber's misadventures in South Korea, Gorenflo (2014b) penned a commendatory piece, "Why Banning Uber Makes Seoul Even More of a Sharing City," which helped enhance Seoul's reputation for sharing done right.[5] By 2015, the wonders of the Sharing City Seoul became a usual blithe aside among sharing advocates, similar to how it came up in Balaram's presentation (e.g., Baeck and Altabev 2016; Clarence 2015; Stephany 2015, pp. 177-178).

The few critically informed accounts of Seoul's sharing economy questioned the local contributions of international platforms, such as Airbnb and Uber, but were unequivocally enthusiastic about local sharing enterprises. A much-quoted piece by researcher Emily Hong (2015) identifies a coexistence of two sharing economies in Korea. One of Seoul's sharing economies is "small-scale, hyper local and socialist in flavor," "comprised of dedicated individuals applying sharing principles to build communities in Seoul" and generating little revenue. The other sharing economy is "increasingly capitalistic, driven by global flows of money and people;" its representatives are Airbnb and its middle-class hosts. Hong ends on the optimistic note that both sharing economies stand to contribute to "future happiness and prosperity." Sociologist Monica Bernardi echoes Hong's

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[5] Uber began offering its luxury service in Seoul in August 2013, in cooperation with the local providers of luxury limousine services. Meeting opposition from Korean Taxi Workers' Union and the Seoul Metropolitan Government, the company came under investigation for violating the Passenger Transport Service Act. Uber lobbied for altering regulations to legalize its services, but those efforts failed. When Uber launched its peer-to-peer service in August 2014, it was declared illegal, and in December 2014 Uber CEO Kalanick was indicted in South Korea for illegally operating rental cars as taxis.

assessment of Seoul's two sharing economies, but also links sharing's apparent success to promotion of social entrepreneurship (Johnson and Bernardi 2015). Both Hong and Bernardi render more balanced accounts than average accolades for Seoul's sharing wonders, but still do not openly question the promotional narrative of the Sharing City Seoul.[6]

Sharing in Seoul

While international media portrayed Seoul as a city where a sharing future has been realized, the achievements of Seoul's sharing economy on the ground have been ambiguous. First of all, international writers waxing lyrical about the Sharing City Seoul overstate the scale of Seoul's sharing economy. A 2015 opinion poll by a market research company reported that after three years since Seoul was declared a sharing city less than two in ten South Koreans knew what the sharing economy was (Kang 2015). A year later, a poll reported that about a half of Seoulites had not heard of the Sharing City Seoul policy, and within the half who had heard, 40 percent knew it only by name; less than one in ten Seoulites "knew well" what the program was about (Seoul City Government 2016). The number of residents familiar with Seoul's sharing economy might even have been exaggerated because the survey was conducted online, which introduces a bias toward the technology-savvy population, which is more likely to be among users of sharing services. Overall, only 12 percent of Seoulites reported having used the services provided under Seoul' sharing policy—an unimpressive number for a sharing city, considering, for example, that of all US adults 15 percent have used car-sharing services and 11 percent have used home-sharing platforms (Smith 2016).

To add anecdotal evidence, the notion of sharing economy was unfamiliar to most South Koreans I talked to about this research project. Only my acquaintances among the Creative Commons activists and their circle of IT entrepreneurs were fluent in the vocabulary of *kong'yu*, whereas my university colleagues and students usually needed an explanation when I brought it up. While many have heard of the Nanum Car service and a few have tried it, none of my acquaintances used it regularly and most did not

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[6] South Korean observers were also reluctant to deviate from the success story of the Sharing City Seoul. Local critiques of the sharing economy were few and focused on foreign sharing giants, particularly on Uber; South Koreans who interacted with international observers directed their criticisms at the excessive regulation that gets in the way of sharing enterprises.

associate the service with the sharing economy. In other words, the sharing economy was far from a mainstream phenomenon contra the accounts by international commentators, who painted Seoulites' lives as saturated with it.

Curiously, the most locally visible of Seoul's sharing initiatives—a city-run bike-sharing network called Seoul Bike Ttarŭng'i—received little attention from foreign observers. Launched in October 2015, it was a late addition to the Sharing City Seoul plan. While heavily used by the locals, Ttarŭng'i failed to draw international interest likely because it hardly differed from the technology-enabled bike-sharing systems already implemented in many cities since the early 2000s (DeMaio 2009). That it was managed by the city also stretched its sharing economy credentials and invited associations not with sexy startups but with traditional city services, such as public libraries and communal swimming pools.

Other sharing services that did take hold in Seoul were also anything but disruptive of the existing economic arrangements, contra the bold ambitions of sharing champions outside South Korea. Seoul's innovation was not in experimenting toward a post-capitalist future, as some OuiShare participants imagined themselves doing, but in honing a business model which capitalizes on Internet-enabled mediation.

This is well illustrated by the scene of the car services associated with the sharing economy. Gorenflo of Shareable lauded Seoul for banning Uber, but the landscape of what goes under car-sharing in Seoul hardly fits the story of small-scale local providers leaving corporations in the cold. The same month when Uber was forced to shut down its peer-to-peer service in Seoul, in March 2015, South Korea's largest IT company Kakao launched KakaoTaxi, its own platform for hailing cabs, and swiftly occupied the niche of Internet-enabled on-demand rides. Kakao was a result of a 2014 merger of one of South Korean largest Internet portals and South Korea's top messaging service. Becoming the first Korean Internet company to be recognized as a conglomerate (based on its total amount of assets), Kakao, as of 2016, had 45 subsidiaries, and its chairman Kim Beom-soo (Kim Pŏm-su) was Korea's 13th richest man (Korea Fair Trade Commission 2016; Hong et al. 2017). As for the city-sponsored Nanum Car, its main contractors, SoCar and Green Car, became invested in by major Korean conglomerates, SK and Lotte respectively. In other words, the sharing economy has done little to disturb the entrenched interests of South Korean big capital, whose monopolization of economic opportunities at the expense of workers and small and medium companies has been a long-standing critique of South Korean capitalism.

Moreover, opportunities for launching sharing startups were

disproportionately geared toward middle-class youths. Not only did they possess the Internet savvy to learn about opportunities created by the city and develop sharing platforms, they also could afford the time to attend sharing schools for aspiring entrepreneurs and enroll in startup incubators to utilize the support offered by the city. They were also better positioned to recover should their venture fail to take off. Writing about entrepreneurial mobilization of youth in the related area of social economy, Kim (2016, pp. 270-271) sees it as the state's strategy to mitigate youth unemployment while placing the risks on the youths themselves, whose passion and idealism get thus exploited because few of young people would have knowledge, experience or networks to run a successful, financially sound organization.

What Hong (2015) described as the "socialist in flavor" niche of Seoul's sharing economy has been too marginal to amount to a notable disruption. The media's darling Open Closet, nonprofit startup that rents donated suits to young job seekers, heavily relies on volunteer labor to stay afloat. Other sharing nonprofits hardly departed from the time-tested community-based initiatives, such as child-clothing swaps or second-hand sales. Introducing online platforms to mediate those exchanges was an innovative feature that expanded their scale beyond the immediate neighborhood, but it also made them barely distinguishable from mainstream consumer exchanges. While worthy endeavors in their own right, they hardly presented an anti-neoliberal challenge, whose promise enticed many sharing enthusiasts. That the Sharing City Seoul has meant business as usual came off in the course of the Seoul Sharing Fest, the South Korean counterpart to the OuiShare Fest, to which I turn next.

Vignette 2: Seoul Sharing Fest, November 2016

If the OuiShare Fest was described as "TED meets Burning Man" (Arjun Sundararajan qtd. in OuiShare Fest 2016), the Seoul Sharing Fest was a mix of a niche trade show and an industry-government conference. The spacious exhibition hall of Dongdaemun Design Plaza, Seoul's tourist site and convention venue, hosted booths of two dozen local sharing enterprises, richly supplied with glossy informational brochures and promotional gifts. Those wares were handed out to visitors, many of whom were families and tourists checking out the weekend events at the Plaza.

The two-day festival kicked off with a ceremony of signing a sharing declaration on a stage in the corner of the exhibit. Flown-in foreign experts and South Korean participants filled the front rows, though there were many

empty seats at the back of the dozen rows of foldable chairs fetched for the occasion. After several welcoming remarks, including from Mayor Park and Airbnb co-founder Joe Gebbia, the mayors of seven South Korean cities (including Park himself) and heads of two city districts ascended the stage, to a somewhat thin applause. As the professional announcer read aloud the sharing declaration, we in the audience were asked to stand up and, together with the mayors and district heads on the stage, commit to sharing by raising our fists—a common gesture of committed struggle in South Korea—and repeating the pledge. For the rest of the festival, the stage was taken over by a fashion show of Korean traditional clothing and students' presentations on sharing. Foreign guests and interested observers were directed to the adjacent conference room for panels.

The opening keynote address by Neal Gorenflo rehearsed the usual tale of sharing pundits—the world is in crisis, sharing is the remedy. He retold the anecdote which opens his influential co-edited volume, *Share or Die* (Harris and Gorenflo 2012). After making a case for the sharing economy, Gorenflo went on to compliment Seoul and its mayor: "Sharing is the soul of cities, we must share to live, that is the meaning of the Sharing City Seoul. … I have recommendations, but Seoul is doing it," he said. Gorenflo ended with a call to enhance sharing even further, to "go for broke." He encouraged support for cooperatives and cooperative platforms—"imagine Airbnb owned by hosts," he said. His enthusiasm for sharing was mixed with caution about predatory sharing platforms, quite in the spirit of presentations at the OuiShare Fest.

The Seoul festival, however, was interested neither in unearthing attempts at realizing utopian projects to generate energy for new experiments nor in creating opportunities for eccentric dreamers to meet up. If Cabaret Sauvage was taken over by young experimenters aspiring, however naively, to break away from corporate hierarchies, tyranny of the bottom line, and try out new social arrangements, the Seoul Sharing Fest was a gathering of mostly middle-aged established professionals from businesses, governments, and various research organizations. Case studies and recommendations were presented in the traditional conference formats, and no workshops or interactive activities took place. The enticement for participation in Seoul's sharing economy was primarily commercial—discount coupons that the booths at the exhibition handed out.

That Seoul's sharing initiatives were primarily interested in seizing on a profitable business model was evident in the presentations by most South Korean speakers. The other keynote address, by Cha Doo Won (Ch'a Tu-won) of Korea Institute of Science and Technology Evaluation and

Planning, equated the sharing economy with on-demand service provision and lumped cooperative platforms and corporate sharing together. Cha's example of the sharing economy's social contributions was Uber developing a self-driving car. His talk was representative of how South Korean presenters, contra Gorenflo, brought up Uber and Airbnb as success stories. One session (out of five altogether) did include three presentations on the state of local sharing in three city districts in South Korea, and speakers showcased such sharing achievements as a neighborhood tool library, a discounted wedding hall for local couples, and an app for selling used textbooks. The overall emphasis at the conference, however, was on how to make sharing initiatives profitable and attractive to investors, which became particularly clear in the concluding expert panel on development strategies for sharing businesses and organizations.

My sketch of Seoul's sharing achievements and the Seoul Sharing Fest shows that Seoul's sharing economy has been primarily a business model, and its communal benefits have been assumed to arise automatically from the sharing efficiencies enabled by the Internet. This faith in technology is not that different from the attitudes of sharing enthusiasts everywhere (Slee 2015). In Seoul, this technological fetishism was combined with the imaginary of entrepreneurs as natural leaders for positive social change, whereas at OuiShare, for example, this trust in entrepreneurial leadership was ambivalent, as indicated by many discourses of the sharing economy as a social movement and the recent turn to cooperative structures as better platforms for sharing.

It might appear that, by contrasting the OuiShare Fest and the Seoul Sharing Fest, I am making a case that Seoul does the sharing economy wrong. This is not my intention. Such a criticism would ignore how Seoul—the first sharing city—is an integral part of how the *sharing economy as a global phenomenon* has been shaping up. Too often non-Western locales are treated as local adaptors of processes presumably initiated elsewhere. In so far as Seoul has been the pioneer in the sharing economy—however ambiguous its actual outcomes—its experiences, discourses, imaginations, and appearances are *constitutive* in this global phenomenon, as Baralam's evocation of the Seoul mayor in the history of the sharing economy rightly recognized. Sharing City Seoul is not about misapplying ideologies developed in San Fransisco and Paris, but about governance experiments that harness new technology and negotiate local and global imaginaries of a good society and capitalism.

For grasping the sharing economy as a set of global discourses and

practices, the two festivals offer different parts of the puzzle, solving which might draw out not only a sharpened critique but also rescue attempts at social change that sharing experiments enable, however varied they are in different locales. Specifically for the role of the Sharing City Seoul in the global sharing imaginaries, I am drawing out a paradox: The official embrace of Seoul's sharing economy prevented it from deviating too far—if at all—from business as usual. Yet this official and highly visible embrace of sharing by the municipal government is what allows international observers to imagine Seoul as a city where sharing has been transformative—an imaginary that inspires new sharing experiments and city-level initiatives elsewhere. Sharing experiments in Seoul are unlikely to yield revolutionary outcomes, but their imaginaries nurture imaginations of sharing experimenters all over the world, such as at the OuiShare Fest. While the latter's achievements also fall short of furnishing a new world, such gatherings keep the conversation going about life after capitalism, and that is already a step forward from accepting neoliberal status quo as the only feasible option.

Conclusion

This article has explored the transnational imaginaries of Seoul's sharing economy and juxtaposed them against the actualization of the sharing economy in the city. I highlighted how the celebration of Seoul as a shining example of the sharing economy by English-writing authors depends on misunderstanding of what goes on under the Sharing City Seoul policy, on exaggerating the scope and scale of Seoul's sharing economy, and on overlooking its comfortable complicity with the entrenched distribution of wealth and power. Having argued that the Sharing City Seoul is misunderstood by international observers, I nevertheless insisted that its imaginaries have been productive in generating momentum for sharing experiments beyond South Korea. The tale of the Sharing City Seoul as it has been told by sharing advocates, such as Balaram and Gorenflo, competes with the tales of sharing failures at Uber and Airbnb. In that sense, Seoul's sharing effort has nurtured the imaginaries of cooperativism, city-sponsored peer-to-peer exchanges, and other economic experiments, which do step away from the usual commercial transactions, even though the predominance of such innovations in Seoul itself is exaggerated. Whatever the realities of the sharing economy in South Korea, the Sharing City Seoul thus has undoubtedly contributed to preserving its alternative promise worldwide.

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